[From "Die Männerinsel" pp330-338]

[p. 330]

Stopover in an English workhouse.

"*Spalding Workhouse, 19th April 1918*"

I haven't got a proper diary here, only an exercise book. We are sitting in a workhouse in Spalding in the east of England and waiting for the crossing to Holland. The following notes have emerged during my travels from the Isle of Man to this place.

Because the Great German Offensive on the Western Front had begun, and rumours of gigantic successes were going around, our Commandant at our departure was in an especially dark mood. Blazing red in his face and with his moustache a-bristle, he swung his stick right and left on the opened-up hand-luggage and roared out: "I won't have this, away with this suite-case of such voluminosity!" Then everybody had to file past him, enthroned as he was at a table. We'll never see him again.

I rose as early as six, the sky was as clear as a looking-glass, blue, and veined with delicate little white clouds, which floated gaily on the horizon. People are strange. Taking leave of an island on which I had been imprisoned to two-and-a-half years was not easy. But I was sorry for the men left behind, whose hands I had shaken.[i] Once more our hand-luggage and clothing bags were searched through. Items of food for the journey are not allowed. Anyone having them had to hand them in to the soldiers; but we all got a slice of corned beef and a portion of dry bread. We filed past the mortuary; soldiers hemmed us in; we were not permitted to walk on the pavement. Puffing and blowing next to me was a chap who had been an acrobat; he has lung disease. The Austrians, employed for a pittance here in the English brushes factory, followed us with sad eyes. Passing through as yet empty streets, [p. 331] we arrived at the quayside, where hundreds of others from Knockaloe, who had by then been on their journey since 3 a.m., were already waiting for us. In the meantime, the weather had changed, gusty draughts were blowing people's hats off. We waited to get on board for an hour in storm and rain. The little steamer was jam-packed full; we all had to stay pushed up on deck. The journey was appalling. Waves surging high came over us, swamping both us and the sick men lying on their stretchers. Sea-sickness on top of all that, set to music by the foghorn. We had to hold off our entry to the Mersey for four hours. That was because Liverpool, the great international port, had been brought to a complete standstill by our U-boat blockade; the *Mauretania* lay in dock,[ii] and ferries were no longer crossing to Birkenhead. One of the sick men had died on the way while lying on his stretcher. Counting up again came for us: on board, on land, half-frozen, hungry and sick, we waited; the only thing we could see everywhere was women in trousers working away and puffing at cigarettes. At long last, the blacked-out train, a special, came out on to the quay. In the compartment I was in, I found myself sitting next five men with consumption; they coughed all the time, and spat blood; but we were not allowed to open any of the windows; added to that, a Tommy with a bayonet had still to find a seat. After a lot forward jerks, the train pulled away, its wheels for ever singing out the same rhythm; this rhythm slowly grew quicker, and was then sharply broken by two double-strokes; after that, the rhythm once more resumed as it was. This ghost train sped through the night; going via Derby, we crossed the whole of England. Everything in the countryside, villages, small towns, railway stations, lay buried in the darkness of war, as they had done for over four years already. Sitting next to me was a blond man, a Frisian from Borkum; he told me of a deep tunnel they had worked on secretly for six months in Knockaloe; it ran under the barbed-wire entanglement and was intended to lead off into freedom. But a fellow countryman, a Jew, had betrayed them, and as punishment they had had to spend four months [p. 332] in the stone quarries. Finally we all fell asleep, worn out. We did not awaken until a trumpet blared "*Get out*." We were there! Four of us at a time got into trains. Volunteers were being called for, to unload the large luggage. Men who were seriously ill were taken away in cars, the others of us had to march. The empty hour between midnight and tomorrow made the houses and hutments which, dead and shut, accompanied us on our way, appear especially bleak. The wind, already salty to the tongue from the nearby North Sea shores, was blowing cold. Our destination was an ancient building of red brick, a workhouse and old women's home. After roll call was taken once more, we were taken through stuffy rooms lit by smoky oil lamps, wooden staircases, up into a chamber with twenty-three straw mattresses in it. First of all, everybody had to take the horse blankets we were given into the court yard and beat them; three hundred

and fifty men dedicated themselves to this task at two o'clock in the morning, in snow flurries that could arrive without warning. The iron stove was cold, so we all slept in our overcoats and boots. At six o'clock in the morning, we all marched out into the snow-covered courtyard, where six metal buckets stood, with only one tap to fill them up for washing. Could you imagine it? Many of us full of scarcely imaginable yearning for the far-off island in the Irish Sea?

For breakfast in the cellar vaults, we had watery gruel and black tea. No matter what the weather, roll call is held in the dark courtyards, a steam whistle gives the signal. On leaving breakfast we literally just stood around, since there was no joint assembly area. This is the place where I should have liked just for once to have a discussion with Viscount Haldane and Sir Henry L. on the subject of English workhouses and English culture, for in England there is only decadent opulence, bourgeois stupidity and unsophisticated masses. And because of this, the nation considers itself too developed for any further development, and ossifies. For a long time now the political state here has disintegrated into a ruling upper class, concerned with making the greatest possible money at business, while ennoblement is simply a matter of being wealthy. [p. 333] The politics and history of England, its whole population is to be viewed only from the side of profit; yes, fortune and adversity, virtue and vice have their iron logic. Everything in this country is set solid in normality, the last rolling of a ball, in which only a few remnants of the initial impact force still live on. This nation is like a burnt-out cardboard box, which has kept its shape. If only the final push would now come, and the whole ghastly spectre collapse into the ground.

Just as on the Island of Men, even here, in the Old Women's Home, one man asks the other, how much longer are we now expected to wait again?

Every midday, frozen meat, with turnips fit only for pigs; every evening, stinking herrings, which I refuse to eat. We sit on our mattresses, smoking or sleeping, newspapers don't get into here, and there is no canteen either. The consumptives are housed in open wooden sheds. I got to know one man who looks like Richard Wagner and who is a chemist; he knows England to the letter; he was at one time a home-tutor in 'very well-known families'.

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"*Spalding near Boston, Workhouse*"

Today we had suitcase inspection, we had to drag our luggage onto a set of scales, and the sergeant checked whether it was overweight; that had already been checked up on in the Isle of Man. Then the things had to be unpacked, and the soldiers went through all the clothing bags, and then re-sealed the luggage. Can that be a sign that we are nearly off on our journey? With new courage, we washed at the pump, the washroom being closed off.— A student gave me news of my old teachers in Kiel — that time in school is already miles behind me! Otto Müller, who in peace time was a German consular officer in Duala, told me [p. 334] the most ghastly stories about what the English had loved to do even before the start of the War to Germans in their colonies, of their journey over to England dressed in tropical clothing in the middle of winter, loaded like cattle into the very bottom of the ship. Herr von Schildt told me of his ranch in Canada, which had been taken away from him without a penny's worth of compensation…

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"*Spalding near Boston, Workhouse*"

Today we had to take our hand luggage and horse-blankets with us; we were isolated and locked in another part of the building prior to our physical inspection. When in the morning we looked out of the window, we saw two charabancs pull up on the street, towards which two contingents of captured German soldiers were moving; these were the first German soldiers I had seen in this War. We all waved for what we were worth, but when the Tommies saw it they yelled out: "*Shut the windows instantly!*" The German soldiers had great

yellow patches sewn on their uniforms, so that they would be recognised in any attempted escape. One of them, who had attempted to escape, had already been shut up for some days in a neighbouring shed; his teeth chattered from cold and hunger; through a Tommy, we managed to send him some money, bread, and cigarettes.

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The medical inspection has taken place. The doors were once more unbolted.

It's the end of April, and the whole workhouse is snowed up. They say we shall have to stay here for another three or four weeks, the hospital ships not being able to leave Rotterdam because of the danger from mines. In the lavatories, Tommies hang around after us, trying to sell us smuggled-in tobacco, [p. 335] at very decent prices, they let it be known as well that the English had suffered a bloody defeat at Zeebrügge. We were greatly shocked to hear that Richthofen, the dare-devil Red Baron, had perished in combat.

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"*Spalding near Boston, Workhouse*"

Hurrah! Tomorrow's the day our journey is set to begin. All night, men were playing Skat once more, the open door of the stove lent light to the scene.

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"*Rotterdam, 1st May 1918*"

Unfathomable oceans lie between yesterday and today, where I am sitting in the writing-room of the *Weimar Hotel*……

At two o'clock in the morning the bells had belted out in alarm all through the building. Men drunk with sleep got out of bed and staggered down the rickety stairs, matches provided light to find the way to the washroom. At three o'clock, there was breakfast in the soup cellar, which was lit by two open flames of gas. The impression this English poorhouse made on me I shall never forget! It was still like being in a dream. Roll call was taken in the courtyard, by the light of magnesium flares. Then out we went with the escort to the main gateway. The sky lay lowly illuminated over the roofs, the first lorries were taking camouflaged loads to the market; an icy wind was blowing towards us. At four o'clock, we arrived at the railway station, the columns broke up, the train was stormed, but it didn't pull out for another hour. We tried to staunch our hunger by smoking cigarettes. It turned to day. Fully-laden coal trains went past us incessantly. Everywhere, even in the countryside, were these English contrasts between the organised chaos of the industrial areas and the immensely expansive parklands and charming pasturage landscapes around medieval manor houses. After an hour, our train pulled up on the quayside in Boston. [p. 336] We had to get out, one by one, to answer questions put by three detectives. We got aboard the tender of an English warship, during which process the sailors flung our luggage after us with the fury of barbarians, breaking a lot of it and losing the contents; the officers standing had a real belly-laugh. It took an hour for us to pass down the *Wash* and to reach the shipping roads, where the three Dutch hospital ships stood at anchor. The neutral flags, full of promise, waved in our direction. We got on to the rope ladder and went up to the *Koningin Regentes*;[iii] the English officers left us, Red-Cross nurses gave each one of us a cabin card for forward or aft on the ship. *We were no*

longer on enemy territory! But the Dutch crew and service staff were not very friendly, and pretended not to know any German. Silent and sullen, they changed money and handed out food. You could get lots of things; the evening already provided us with the first drunks.

We remained for three days in the roads at Boston, the reason being that a gale was sweeping across the North Sea, and the drift mines were a great source of danger. I was just dreaming in my cabin in the aft section of the ship, when I was woken up by the racket kicked up by the anchor being raised. It was half-past three in the morning. The engines pounded, the water rushed, a juddering and jittering thrilled the body of the ship. Everybody had to get through the hatch and onto deck; no one was permitted to remain behind, because there would be possible loss of life, if the ship sank quickly. The sun rose blood-red out of the sea, the swell of the waves became stronger and stronger. Everybody was given a life-belt. We sailed, guided by an English pilot, along the Norfolk coast, so that we could then directly cross the North Sea minefields, and get out into the open sea. Entire mountain ranges of foam-topped waves beat against the sides of the ship, making the saltwater spray up several metres high over the deck. In front of us the steamer *Sindoro* was rocking away, and behind us the *Zeeland*. One buoy after the other [p. 337] marked out the passage that led between the coastal minefields. A so-called 'Sham Convoy' met us; this was intended to trick the German U-boats and consisted of freshly-painted old wooden ships, while the real convoy, on another course, followed later. We had already been underway for eight hours, and were still in English territorial waters. Finally, at one o'clock in the afternoon, at the position of the last red lightship, which was where the pilot left us, we were on our way into the no-man's territory of the German Ocean.[iv] Out in the open sea, "the swell will get much less," I was assured by Kalkschmidt, who had been a boatswain's mate, but I, too, was choking with seasickness. But nothing helped: the ship rolled so much that I soon felt myself being shaken like a little ball between the fear of death and the hope of life, until the seasickness grew so great that you expired in the mouse-hole of apathy. While this was happening my senses, however, did remain half awake, and every change forced its way quick as lightning into my consciousness, I heard every word and felt us moving up and down into the depths. The gentlest contact with a drift mine, and we would fly blown to atoms into the air. Was it to be that the words "see you never ever again!" would be fulfilled, words which a workman shouted after me when I was leaving Berlin four years earlier, and which have for ever resounded in my ears? Then one man shouted out loudly: "There's another mine." Crew members equipped with field-glasses stood along the ship's entire side. Again there was a yell: "There, there, a mine." The entire ships was illuminated with festoons of electric bulbs, to mark it out as a hospital ship. A German U-boat was also sighted; everybody cried out "Hurra!" The ship's bell struck two o'clock, three o'clock, and so it carried on. The heave of the sea appeared to take on greater strength. "The trip will take another eight hours", I heard. There is no cure for seasickness, and only a few remained unscathed. The cramps in your body press you together, as though you were lying in the [p. 338] black fist of a giant. Time and time again came the call of "A mine!" "We've already seen eighteen", someone who meant me well whispered in my ear. "In six hours, we'll be in Dutch territorial waters", I heard from another mouth. In six hours a lot can happen, I thought, and saw a spot which swelled out to the size of the universe. At last the first lightship came into view, another four hours now! — "Fishing boats!" someone called out. I opened my eyes, dusk had already descended, the electric lights on the three ships shone out colourfully, the sea was calmer; and it was true, ships with brown sails were approaching us. Not until the sun went down did we sense the flat coast of Holland on the horizon, and an hour later we anchored off Nieuwe Diep. Everybody was allowed to go and lie down in his cabin. Sleep grabbed me like a pair of pliers, and tore me off into dreamless emptiness.

The following morning our journey went past Scheveningen into the estuary of the Maas; high, green dikes on both banks. Heavily-laden steamers with enormous Red Crosses painted on them, and with super-sized letters reading out *Belgian Relief Ship* came towards us, taking food to Antwerp. Towards midday our ships docked at the quay. The great East India passenger liners were all lying idle in their docks, but all the same there was more traffic here than in Liverpool. I telegraphed my mother with the news of my arrival in Rotterdam. We were welcomed first of all by a lady from the Aid Committee of the Red Cross, who 'took note' of a thousand requests; then a lady approached us, who was giving out bunches of flowers, and — dear me! just look over there! — it was Frau Rosen, wife of His Excellency Dr. Georg Rosen, the Imperial German Ambassador, who immediately remembered her invitation to me to come to Lisbon in 1913, and now asked me to visit her in The Hague, if Georg could get leave. She also promised to ensure that I be given permission to stay in Rotterdam, and recommended the *Weimar Hotel*. Then young girls handed out cigarettes and [p. 339] chocolate. That was all very nice. — We left the ship at three o'clock, and proceeded into a large customs shed, where the representative of the War Ministry, a very young captain in civilian clothes, gave a brisk speech of welcome, in which he very tactfully and regretfully pointed out that this time

unfortunately more civilian than military prisoners had been exchanged, and that it was a lie when people said that Englishmen were being better accommodated on the beach at Scheveningen than the Germans in the camps in eastern Holland. — And so it turned to evening; the lights in the harbour came on, we sat for the last time on deck, smoked good Dutch tobacco, and made plans.

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Endnotes

i Dunbar-Kalckreuth adds the note in German (p. 330, fn.2): "My father's hand also".

ii RMS *Mauretania*: Cunard White Star Line, 1906-34. In 1916 she became a hospital ship; also in that year she was commissioned by the Canadian Government to bring Canadian troops to Liverpool. [*wiki*]

iii 'The Queen Regent', a paddle steamer, sunk by German U-boat UB-107 on 6 June 1918.

iv German Ocean: 'part of the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, lying between Norway and Denmark to the east, Scotland and England to the west, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and France to the south.' (*Wiki*)

Background

Yet again Riverside station at Liverpool Princes dock was used to avoid a cross-city transfer. In late 1916 two transit camps were established within easy reach of Boston to allow repatriation of old and infirm internees as had been agreed in talks with the German authorities and for some internees to be interned, though under possibly better conditions in neutral Holland and also in Switzerland. These camps were at Spalding and Sleaford - the first batches of some 200 or so internees departed these camps on the 7th January 1917. In late1918 a third such transit camp was established as 'North Camp 8' at Ripon, which would appear to have used various East Coast ports - possibly Hull with direct connections to North German or even Baltic ports. Alexandra Palace played a considerable role post Armistice as a transit camp using both Harwich and Tilbury as the departure ports - prior to the start of transfers from Boston in early 1918 it had provided a very reduced service via Tilbury using English vessels - Pastor Hartmann was in such a party.

The torpedoing and sinking of the clearly marked hospital ship *Koningin Regentes* brought a hiatus in transfers from Boston.

Otto Muller may possibly be Otto Ferdinand Thomas Muller who was transferred to Spalding in the same party from Knockaloe but he was noted as aged 21 when interned at Stratford in 1915 - also most career consular staff had been repatriated in 1916. The transfer of German civilians from West Africa is described by many as a horrendous voyage.

Index

Any comments, errors or omissions gratefully received The Editor

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